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Guidelines for writing directions and for writing exercises for the disadvantaged who are on the lowest reading level are presented. Sentence and language structure should be simple, brief, and conversational. Directions should be considered a part of the text and should be on the same reading level. Directions should be specific and authoritative; they should be illustrated by examples.

Rules are presented to help avoid trouble areas in exercise construction and to develop proficiency in the writing of different kinds of exercises. Exercises have an important function in helping young adults overcome negative self-images. Sample styles are given of vocabulary exercises and of reading comprehension exercises.

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# SOME SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR WRITING MATERIALS FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

by

James Olsen

Editor, McGraw-Hill

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# SOME SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR WRITING MATERIALS FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

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Here are some guidelines you can follow when you write for disadvantaged young adults who are on the lowest reading level. As students progress, you will probably want to modify or change them.

1. Keep your sentences short, not more than 10-15 words on the average. Avoid sentences that involve qualifications, extensions of an idea, etc...

2. Keep your sentence structure simple: subject, verb, object. Avoid complex inversions, dangling modifiers, participial phrases, etc...

3. Use present tense verbs whenever possible.

4. Avoid verb forms like: to be, was, has, make, etc... Use strong verbs.

5. Use definite and indefinite articles sparingly. Try not to open sentences with "a," "the."

6. Avoid tricky punctuation like colons and semi-colons, and dashes.

7. Avoid words that link and relate: "then" and "when" (time words), "because" and "therefore" (cause and effect words), "if" (conditional). Such words point up relational properties of things, people, and ideas that call for mental leaps that many of the disadvantaged find difficult.

8. Be personal. Use the "you" approach and include many personal references.

9. Do not weight paragraphs with too many ideas at one time. (A well written paragraph is, in this respect, quite similar to a program.)

10. The one language the disadvantaged knows well is speech. Research indicates that he does best with writing that approximates speech. Therefore, use a casual and conversational style. Use quotes and dialogue whenever possible.

11. To "tie down" an abstract idea, use a metaphor or simile that the reader knows. Illuminate generalizations with many examples.

12. Avoid large number and arithmetical symbols. For example, make 25% "one in four."

13. Be sure that a pronoun does not stray too far away from its antecedent nouns. And do not be afraid to repeat words - with moderation.

14. Above all: do not be preachy. Avoid: "ought," "must," "should."

15. Involve the reader as much as possible. Ask him questions, tell him jokes, "bait" him, challenge him, dare him, etc. This helps to pull him into the communication act.

If you are writing for this audience for the first time, you may find that in applying these guidelines you come up with a choppy, staccato style. But with practice you can make your text "roll" like a car on a roller coaster. Rhythm is important. As you check over your work, read your copy aloud to see if it moves along quickly and fluidly.

Do you find your copy interesting? Would you want to read it? Have you talked about your subject rather than dramatized it? (Show action; don't describe it.) Ask yourself these questions before you start your rewrite.

WRITING DIRECTIONS

The directions you write that accompany your exercises in reading comprehension, vocabulary development and language arts practice are part of the text. Therefore, they deserve the same attention you would give the text or to the exercises.

You should be sure that:

1. The directions that accompany your exercises are on the same reading level as the text. To check this, apply one of the readability formulae.

2. The directions are clear and simple to follow. This group has difficulty following directions and so you must be especially careful to be sure that the student knows what you want from him. To check this, see if you can follow the directions yourself or try them on someone else. Without any help from anyone - remember you won't be there to help him and in many instances the student may be working alone without a teacher - the student should know how to answer the exercises from the directions you provide. Keep your directions short and to the point. Remember that directions are not especially interesting to read. Directions are tools we use to get certain kinds of behaviors from students.

3. Do part of the exercise for the student so he can see what you want from him. This practice illustrates your directions operationally. Tell the student in the directions that you have done the first question for him.

4. Do not direct the student to answer very many "open-ended" questions. Organize the student's response for him by providing choices and then tell him in the directions that you have provided these choices. For example, don't ask him to give the meaning of the word trainee. Give him the word trainee and ask him to pick from a group of definitions you provide, the best definition for this word.

5. Make your directions specific. Don't say, "Match each word with its definition." Say, "Match each of the words on the left with its correct definition on the right." Then tell him how he is to do this.

6. Make your directions authoritative. Use the imperative form for verbs. This practice gives your directions a "tone" because you are telling the student you know what you want. For example, tell the student "On line 8, write the following words."

7. Put longer directions in a time-sequence for the student. If you don't, he won't know what to do first. Rather tell him, "First....., Second....., Now....., Finally....."

WRITING EXERCISES

The exercises you write are an integral part of the text material because to a large extent, they dictate the nature of participation on the student part, and frequently influence the degree of learning significantly. Exercises also extend and reinforce the concepts and attitudes implicit in the printed word because the student uses and transfers what he has learned when he does an exercise.

Writing good exercises, at its easiest, is a very difficult task. This task is further complicated by the nature of the audience. This audience is composed of many disaffected, hostile students who do not see themselves positively in a learning situation. Their previous failure in school has convinced them, very often, that they are not capable of learning and the exercise can become in this context, another instance of their failure and stupidity. You should use, therefore, recognition-type exercises, rather than recall, and short answer types that do not involve too much writing.

Varied and interesting exercises that have been carefully designed to promote student success can help young adults overcome the negative self-image as learners which they often have of themselves. Exercises should do more than simply act as a check to find whether or not the student has learned the information or details in a selection. True, many exercises may be based on recall, but it is especially important that you also include exercises that involve critical thinking, differentiating fact from opinion, and so on.

To help you avoid some of the worst pitfalls of exercise construction and to write different kinds of interesting and challenging exercises that deal with the same or a similar skill, you have below some rules of exercise writing you may wish to follow. After these rules, you then have a series of sample exercises which embody the rules. You may be able to use some of these different styles of exercises in your own work.

RULES OF EXERCISE WRITING

1. Keep the reading level of your exercise items on the same level as the text. Very often, writers will let these items "get away" from them in terms of reading level and the resulting complexity confuses the student.

2. Let the occurence of correct responses follow a random pattern.

3. Avoid ambiguity. Before writing the exercise question, know exactly what you are trying to bring out of the student. Then make sure your questions are clear and precise in their meaning.

4. Be sure there is one, and only one, correct or clearly best answer.

5. Beware of indefinite or "open" completion items.

6. When you have a completion exercise, put the blanks at the end of the sentence.

7. Do not have too many questions within any given exercise. (e.g. more than 10)

SAMPLE STYLES OF EXERCISES

There is a saying that goes, "There's more than one way to skin a cat." It is also true that there is more than one way to teach a skill. The greater variety you bring to your exercises, the less likely it is that the student will become bored and disinterested. To help you attain this goal, you see below some sample exercises that you can use to teach reading comprehension and vocabulary development.

A. VOCABULARY EXERCISES

1. Match each word on the left with its definition on the right by putting the number of the word in the correct blank. (The first word has been done for you.)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. unemployed | ____ | a place where cars are fixed |
| 2. garage | 1 | out of work |

2. Underline the word at the right that means

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. a person looking for a job | applicant | employer | trainee | employee |
| 2. a written name | blank | signature | form | application |

3. Check the phrase that completes each sentence best. (The first one has been done for you.)

1. A trainee is one who

___a. is a boss
___b. is an employee who has been working at his job for a long time
X c. is just learning a job
___d. is an employment counselor

4. Underline the word that completes each sentence best. (The first one has been done for you.)

1. If one thing can be told from another, it can be

interesting good <u>distinguished</u>

5. On the line provided, give the meaning of each of the following words. (The first one has been defined for you.)*

a. trainee — <u>SOMEONE WH O IS BEING TAUGHT</u>
b. employed — _____

6. In the blank on the right, write a word that means the opposite of each of the following words. (The first word has been done for you.)

a. fast — <u>slow</u>
b. up — _____

7. In each of the sentences, underline the word in the parenthesis that fits the sentence best. (The first one has been done for you.)

1. John was just hired as a (<u>trainee</u>, employment counselor, employer) in the garage at the Zerox Motor Company

8. Find the right meaning for each sentence. Put the letter of each meaning below next to the sentence it fits.

(continued)

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* Exercises 5 and 6 are examples of open-ended exercises that should be used sparingly with this population.

Hollow

a. having an empty space within it
b. shaped like a cup or bowl
c. deeply set, sunken
d. empty, worthless, phony
e. dull, muffled

1. The child's hollow cheeks told of his hunger. c
2. The voices of the men in the basement sounded hollow. e
3. We soon learned that all of the promises he had made were hollow. d
4. The coconut shell was heavy, but it proved to be hollow. a
5. Jim spent the night lying in a hollow in the sand. b

9. Salon has the two meanings listed below. Which of the two was used in the paragraph you just read? (Circle letter)

a. large room where you greet guests
b. business that gives some kind of service to customers

10. Can you tell which meaning of salon is being used in the next sentence? (Circle the correct letter.)

a or b -- The salon was filled with strangers.
a or b -- If more people didn't come to his salon, he would soon be broke.
a or b -- Refreshments were being served in the salon.

11. The following sentences have something wrong with them. Make them right by changing one word.

1. Tom overslept and was early for work.
2. The strict foreman made the days very pleasant for Tom.
3. They kept Tom busy every minute so that he had much time for lunch.
4. Tom looked with pride at the mistake he had made.

READING COMPREHENSION

Below are some sample reading comprehension exercises you may be able to use.

1. Circle the word on the right that best answers the question. (The first one has been done for you.)

From the information in the article you can fairly say

a. Clerks are dull. Yes No Doesn't say
b. Plumbers are not smart people. Yes No Doesn't say

2. Check the phrase that completes each sentence best. (The first one has been done for you.)

1. According to the article,

X a. Plumbers earn more than clerks.
____ b. All clerks are plumbers.
____ c. Plumbers don't need any special kind of training.
____ d. You can't become a plumber unless your father is one.

3. Put these sentences in the proper order. Read each sentence on the left and then write the sentence that should be on the first line. Then write the sentence you think should be second on the next line. Do this for all the sentences. (The first one has been done for you.)

Sam became an electrician.
Sam was trained on-the-job.
Sam became interested in electrical work
Sam got instruction in electricity before he started working.

1. Same became interested in electrical work
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

4. Give two facts from paragraph 3 that support the statement below.

It takes special training to become an electrician.

a. _____
b. _____

5. Using the fewest possible words, chart the details of the job you just read about.

| JOB TITLE | DUTIES | PLACE OF WORK | QUALIFICATIONS | SALARY |
|---|---|---|---|---|

6. In the blank provided, write T next to the statements that are true. Write F next to the false statements. (The first one has been done for you.)

a. ___T___ Plumbers earn more than messengers.
b. _____ Unemployment checks never stop.